THE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN

December 10, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 11:1-9
Matthew 3:1-6
Romans 15:1-7

He is our peace...and has broken down the wall of hostility..."
--Ephesians 2:14 (RSV)

I received a letter from a friend several weeks ago. He was a minister, is now a successful travel agent, but still thinks and sees the world like a minister.

"Dear John:

Just a bit over two weeks ago, I happened to be in East Berlin on the day of the immense demonstration against the policies of the East German government. I wanted to share this with you because it occurred to me that you might just appreciate the observations of a friend who was there. You may recall that on Saturday, November 4, a huge gathering of workers, students, retirees, moms, dads, kids, teachers, church leaders, writers and film stars took place in Karl Marx Platz in East Berlin. Believe it or not, as an American (as always, I was easily detected as such) I was invited to join the protest march and to listen to the speeches (28 of them, as I recall) that climaxed the demonstration.

"Estimates of the size of the crowd vary from 500,000 to one million people. It was by far the biggest gathering I ever witnessed - and it was one of the most joyous ones, too. There seemed to be an electrifying spirit of hope and expectation that a repressive government was about to fall - and maybe a wall was about to crumble, too!! (Five days later the Berlin Wall was indeed pierced.)

"There are several insights from that day that I'd like to share with you:

"Words that sound like profanity can be a religious testament. A very pretty lady, perhaps 35-40 years old, was in the march. Actually, she was sort of strolling alongside the marchers. She had a sign in her hands that she lifted high for everyone to see. It was carefully printed in large bold letters and said 'Tear down the God-damned Wall.' It hit me

hard that particular words do not necessarily an expletive make; the very same words can be an article of faith. That lady (and I, too) believes that God does damn walls that enslave and shackle the human spirit.

"For me, November 4 was some day!! It just may well have been the beginning of the end of the World War 11 era - and maybe a first step toward the beginning of the 21st century."

rock on my desk

And so it came down... The Wall which divided a city and a nation for a generation is down. A Wall which symbolized a deeply divided world for forty years is now open and people are walking back and forth through it. It was always more than a wall of course. It was a symbol, for everybody... for people on either side of it: for those who can remember its construction: and the events before it; and the war in which we, or our relatives fought and died, the wall symbolized the pathos of human history, the illusive goal of peace and reconciliation which seems always out of reach. With its blunt ugliness, its cruel barbed wire and machine guns, it represented a tragic and persistent flaw in the human character - perhaps a wall between what is good and noble about us - and what is mean and violent - and it has been breached. And while the future is uncertain and not at all without danger and risk something very significant is transpiring. Church bells are ringing. Families are together. People who haven't seen each other for decades are embracing. It has entranced us. It is still a powerful symbol even as it comes down.

I have found it impossible not to look to the images and metaphors of Scripture to interpret what is transpiring... Isaiah's lovely picture of God's peaceable kingdom... angels singing about Peace on Earth, good will to all. Last week one of the journals I read simply printed without comment, on its cover, the stirring words of Ephesians 2:14 - which I have used as text: "But now in Jesus Christ you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility."

What a wonderfully relevant image! What an incredible Advent this year: to hear again the old stories: to sing "Peace on Earth and mercy mild," all in the context of a real reconciliation happening: old enemies embracing; a literal wall of hostility crumbling, or being knocked down - chip and piece at a time by people on both sides.

It's not always that immediate is it? In fact, sometimes the Christmas story sounds a little tired and whatever meaning it has gets lost in the midst of the cultural year-end festivities. Richard Liefer wrote a clever piece in the Tribune last Thursday about the new freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. "They'll know they have real Western religious freedom when their religion loses its power and cutting edge... when in December the Russian people celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah by arguing over whether creches, crosses and menorrahs may be placed on public property."

Soren Kierkegaard, great Danish theologian in the last century, understood and taught the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility of proclaiming the radical relevance of Christianity in a culture that already thinks it is Christian.

Fred Craddock, one of the best teachers of preaching, asks in an intriguing book about preaching which uses the Kierkegaardian dilemma poses the question, "What is the greatest obstacle the preacher must face?" Is it secularism, or materialism, or godless communism, or scientism, or narcissism? No, says Craddock, the real obstacle is the simple fact that people who come to church have heard it before, all of it, lots of times. "Even for the casual listeners there is a fair degree of predictability... the dead air of familiarity: we have been here before, and here we go again." [Overhearing the Gospel]

The point is well taken. The message is distinct in a culture where it is rarely heard and therefore novel. The familiar passages have power when you hear them in new settings... The angels' song sounds different when you're in a foxhole. The Isaiah vision of a peaceable kingdom is breathtaking when your world is anything but peaceful. Paul's image of the dividing wall of hostility coming down is provocation when your life is walled in by hostility. But here, in the midst of this determined merry-making... it may be the most difficult place in the world for the story to be heard.

My proposal this morning is that the child's birth 2,000 years ago, and the opening of the Berlin Wall are about the same thing. And that if we do give it a moment's thought this morning the birth just might regain its power to surprise us and move us and maybe even convert us, begin to bring down some very personal walls.

Now, let's do a little theology. When St. Paul was near the end of his life he wrote a letter to the tiny Christian church in Rome. Actually Paul was on his way to Rome, a political prisoner. He had been arrested for his religious activities and convictions and, because he was a Roman Citizen, had appealed to the Roman Judicial system. Thus he was on his way to the capital for a trial. The Letter to the Romans is his self-introduction to a group of Christians he has never seen before... It is careful, reasoned theology: it is the only systematic theology in the New Testament we're told and it is not nearly as spontaneous and situational as his other letters. In Romans, Paul delves into the mystery of God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ, Christ's suffering and death, and at the end, the difference the whole enterprise is to make in the lives of believers. Paul's background is Jewish: many of his readers are Jewish. Their deepest conviction is that religion should be expressed by unswerving obedience to the religious law. Paul tells these Roman Christians, however, that they are to live in the love of Christianity: they are to love and forgive one another in the spirit of the love and forgiveness shown to them. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another..."

Paul taught that the purpose for which Christ came was to break down the barriers which divided humankind. The stirring thing about Paul's thought is that it is so big. Paul thinks in global, universal terms. God sent Jesus Christ not simply to serve individuals, to put men and women right with God, but to heal the whole creation. All things will be unified... all divisions healed and the human race will live in a wonderful God-given unity. The goal of God's act of grace in Christ is unity, the

reconciliation of all things. Paul knew that religion itself can be a dividing wall that separates people. He knew it because he had been a religious zealot who believed God's will was served by the harassment and persecution of Christians. Paul is an expert on the subject of religion which divides instead of unites. Religion seems always to create self-righteousness, and self-righteousness is by nature exclusive - including some shutting out the rest. The mystery of God's love in Christ, as Paul had experienced it and then thought about it, was that it was unconditional: it was for all people: none were excluded - as Paul saw it, not Jew, Greek, slave, free man, male, female... Christian people for Paul have the high calling of showing the world what this new humanity, reconciled, at peace, living in harmony, looks like.

"He is our peace - he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility."

700 years or earlier, the Prophet Isaiah wrote a lovely poem about what it would be like when God ruled the world. The Christian Church for centuries, has been reading the Isaiah passages in Advent.

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain."

It is beautiful literature, a lovely picture of a world reconciled, a world without the old threat the strong pose to the weak. American artist Edward Hicks was fascinated by the passage and painted dozens of picture of it. The wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, lion and ox. You probably have seen it: the animals have unique eyes, almost human, big, round, innocent, they stare out at us with childlike vulnerability.

Isaiah looked out at a real world filled with violence, threat of war, oppression and exploitation by the frightfully powerful Assyrian Empire - and saw something else, an alternative vision, a peaceable kingdom, a hope for God's future.

It is what Judeo-Christian religion is ultimately about. It is a stunning vision of what God intends, what could be in the world, what it is supposed to be within the community of God's people. And when we see it; when little bits of it actually come into being in history, when walls that divide people actually come down... or when the leaders of nations meet and actually talk about reducing the number of weapons we have pointed at each other's population centers or the number of divisions we each have poised and ready, facing each other - we who know the vision and the story recognize what that's about. We see God's breaking into our history.

We also recognize it by its absence. That lovely image of Isaiah does not accurately describe a world I know about... There are something like twenty-four civil wars going on - each claiming a minimum of 1,000 lives per year. The grim business of El Salvador is already off the front page and we will soon forget the relentless violence and murder and our sponsorship of it.

When the lion and lamb lie down together, Woody Allen observes, only the lion gets up.

The simple fact is that we are far better at building up walls of separation and hostility than we are tearing them down. We build walls between rival political systems and nations, we seem to need them. We build walls between races, and genders. We build walls of fear and prejudice to keep out people who are different, walls of moralism to keep out people we don't understand, walls of religion to keep out people we don't agree with.

Bringing down walls, bringing people together is not a matter of sociology or politics. It is a matter of our deepest religious convictions. Jesus Christ, we believe, came to reconcile, to bring together, to heal, to make all of creation a harmonious unity... and so dividing walls - of any kind, are simply not tolerable. We are called - you and I - to be the ones who breach them, who knock them down, who will not and do not tolerate them. It is our vocation. We are to be what God's reconciled humanity looks like.

"May God grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may, with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul wrote to the Romans.

That, I believe, is our highest calling as a church of Jesus Christ: to be a reminder to the city, on this lively corner, not only that the holy God has come into the world and loved the world and has acted to save the world: but also to glorify God by demonstrating what God has done, to be an inclusive community, where reconciliation has concrete meaning, where all are welcome, none are excluded, where people, regardless of their station in life, encounter one another simply as children of God and brothers and sisters: to be the place where the dividing walls are all gone... And to be the one place in this world that needs everyone, that relies on, encourages and invites everyone to get in on the act.

God, we believe, is in the business of bringing down the walls that separate people.

God is pleased when political, racial, religious walls are pulled down - or breached.

And God is also pleased when the walls we construct around us, walls which isolate us from others, are overcome.

In Paul's day the wall separated Jews and Gentiles. It was God's great love in Jesus Christ which overcame that ancient and very formidable wall. When people know themselves loved by God, Paul had discovered, they are disarmed - literally. To be loved by the creator God is such an incredible thing, such a leveling, gentling thing, that a man or woman can ease up, can lay down arms, can look at a neighbor or an enemy - or a close friend in a whole new light - as a child of God... a brother or sister in Jesus Christ.

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Having thought about universal reconciliation and political peace, we come full circle back to the walls that divide us from others: from neighbors, fellow workers, fellow students, parents, chilren, friends, spouses.

It gets tough when it is close. In a wonderfully poignant short story called Remembering, poet and essayist Wendall Berry writes about a man and woman whose marriage, once strong and life giving, has disintergrated, bit by bit over the years.

"Now their quarrels did not end their differences and bring them together, but were all one quarrel that had no end. It changed subjects but it did not end. It was no longer about duality but about division, an infinite cold space that opened between them...

"At times in their quarreling he knew he was crying out to her across that abyss, and he knew she heard him but would not pretend it was a call she could answer."

It seems sometimes that we love our walls, or the spaces we keep between ourselves and others.

It seems sometimes that we need those walls, or think we do, to protect our identity or individuality or something.

My guess is that there is not a one of us who doesn't live behind some wall, some of the time, in relation to some person or persons.

My guess is that there is not a one of us who does not need to tear down a wall, or reach across an abyss, toward someone fairly important to us.

It's not difficult to do. Sometimes all it takes is - "I love you..." or "I'm sorry: forgive me..." or "I forgive you."

Sometimes the peaceable kingdom is not just a new era of peace between the Soviet Union and the United States, but peace between a husband and wife, or lovers, or dear friends, or brothers, or sisters, or parents and children, employees and employers.

Sometimes the peaceable kingdom where the walls are all down is personal and internal.

We live most of our lives looking for a peaceable kingdom; a place where there are no walls, no barriers; a place where we are loved and safe and accepted and welcome.

From the day we discover that the world is larger than our mother's arms, we are looking for peace - peace that passes all understanding - peace of heart - peace that stands when all else fails.

Our highest calling as children of God is to extend that peace to one another. It is so important... so precious, one of the oldest worship traditions of the Christian Church is the "Passing of the Peace," the

greeting with a handshake and the words, "The Peace of Jesus Christ be with you."

And once a year we hear a story that reminds us that we are loved; that even if we are not loved by anyone else, we are loved by the God who created us. And that simple story, mysteriously - inexplicably - almost relentless, begins to stir up our longing for peace and to make peace in us and for us - as soon as we hear it again.

It is a story of a peaceable kingdom.

It happens in the City of David, whose Father was Jesse. It is about a branch from those roots.

It is about a poor, vulnerable young woman and a man and how they have to stay in a barn on the night she has her baby.

And how cows and sheep are there, and if you look closely around the edges there is the lion and the leopard and the wolf.

It is a true story. Because vulnerability and weakness are the way God operates in this world, and peace is so precious we must hold it close whenever we encounter it, and there are moments when we know ourselves loved and welcomed by the one who created us and even by this infant who will become a man and go on loving us until he can love no more.

It is a true story because as he is being born, angels are in the sky, a whole sky full of them, and the are singing...

"Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace among
all people."

So, in the two weeks of Advent left for us, hear it again... and experience the walls around your life lowering a bit.

Let him love you.
Let him bring you peace.
Let him make a peacemaker out of you.
He is our Peace.
All praise to Him.

Amen.